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THE LATIN QUARTER AND THE SORBONNE

The Latin Quarter—ancient haunt of the students, artists, and law-clerks of Paris—is slowly changing its aspect. It is no longer the scene of riotous celebrations such as those of the “Brotherhood of Fools” in the *Basoche*—that organization of liberty-loving, wanton, literary-minded ‘scholars’ and clerks of the Palais de Justice, that kept Paris on the *qui vive* during the reign of Louis XII, “father of the people”. Surcharged though it still, fortunately, is, with time-honored spots of peculiar attractiveness—the *quais* with their rows of bookstalls, the numberless schools, the tumbledown houses with shingles informing the curious that the painter, Jean Goujon, or the historian, Jules Michelet, was to be counted among the inhabitants of the Quarter during the greater or lesser portion of his life—the Quartier latin is beginning to put on an attitude of respectability and the diurnality that will soon completely overshadow the mysterious magic of its venerable origins. The ancient bookshops and celebrated taverns of the Boul’ Mich’ bashfully hide their dust-laden shelves and their polished tables beneath the glistening gaze of up-to-date *magasins* and of busy automobile agencies; and dilapidated homes are being fitted up with the “most recent modern improvements” to meet the ever unsatisfied demands for lodgings occasioned by the unnaturally rapid increase in the population of the French capital. The students—and the Quartier fairly teems with students—either inhabit other, less notorious sections of Paris, in which case they seem to spend no more time in the neighborhood of the schools than is actually demanded of them, or, as with the larger majority of the many foreign students, they have their rooms in one or another of the crooked, history-freighted streets of the Quarter, where they pore diligently over their books, with the *licence* or the *agrégation* constantly hovering before them. An air of seriousness prevails that is at once gratifying and disappointing.

To be sure, the Boulevard St. Michel by no means wears the air of a by-street in a provincial town. The “throbbing heart of the Latin Quarter” is still the resort of pleasure-seeking

boulevardiers and of students in search of relaxation from their various exertions. The *cafés*, big and small, all seem to have their *clientèle* of patrons who religiously pass long evenings before a glass of wine or a bock, and while away their time telling interminable stories or uttering compliments to the *cocottes* upon whom the managements of these establishments count so largely for the swelling of their incomes. At the Café d'Harcourt or the Taverne du Panthéon can still stare with reverence upon men whose garb, at least, announces them to be notorious Futurists in art and upon women whose utter nonchalance, as they sip their cordials and smoke their scented cigarettes, proclaims them to be the present-day Aspasia of more than one Pericles well-known in governmental or literary circles.

All this, however, it soon becomes evident, is but the meaningless tinsel of the Latin Quarter; there is in it very little of that spontaneous vivacity that made it an inevitable element of the life of the Quartier of bygone days. It is the schools that predominate to-day, not the *cafés*. The Sorbonne—oldest of universities—is crowded as it has never been in its history. The other two faculties of the University of Paris, those of law and medicine, count their students by the thousands. To obtain seats at any one of the public lectures, students are obliged to be on hand a half-hour in advance of the time announced for the arrival of the professor. The same general condition holds true—comparatively, of course—for the Collège de France, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, the Ecole Polytechnique, and all the other educational institutions of which the Quartier may so justly boast. The French youth—male and female—seems inspired by a passionate desire for knowledge that is shared, in a much more reservedly curious fashion, by the hundreds of strangers who tread the halls of these hoary institutions.

There is little or no resemblance between the Sorbonne and a typical American university—whether the latter be a private corporation or under the control of the state. 'Campus', in the American college sense of the term, the Sorbonne knows not; the nearest approach is the central courtyard, bounded on three sides by the lecture-halls and on the fourth by the rear entrance of the Church of the Sorbonne, wherein lies entombed its patron,

Cardinal de Richelieu. Lacking the American 'campus', the Sorbonne lacks that other quality so characteristic of the American college (of course, it is true that the Sorbonne is a university and not a college), the *esprit de corps* of the student-body. The students are allowed complete liberty in mapping out their programmes, with the result that no two students follow precisely the same course and very few have more than two or three hours weekly in common. As a result, the aspect of practically every class is different, and no one is overwhelmingly interested in the work and the progress of his neighbor. The same is true of the relations between students and professor; in lecture-hall or class-room, the professor is scarcely aware of the identity of the individual students; need it be added, then, that the intimacy between professor and student that often enters to make American college life so personally interesting is entirely non-existent here? In the lecture-hall or the 'Seminar' Retreat, the attitude of the professor is that of the thoroughly impartial *savant*, actuated by the love of and the search for the truth. It is only occasionally that one hears from the *chaire* of the public lecturer a chauvinistic utterance that one would expect to come only from the lips of a Treitschke, but even the natives among the students do not react very favorably to such misplaced outbursts, and the applause is often only tepid. The impression produced by the Sorbonne is that of a hive almost bursting with human bees of the most industrious type, all engaged in the production and the storing of the sweetest and most precious of all honies—the honey of science, of the "truth that alone frees", of the brotherhood that binds all men and transcends the boundaries of nationality, creed, sex, and color. Truly, the Sorbonne stands for all that is highest, not merely in the multi-colored activity of the Latin Quarter, but in the complex of French life itself, and the present-day leadership of French letters and art is assured so long as these remain inspired by the traditions that have raised the University of Paris to the lofty position it now occupies.

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